

DOSSIER

THE ETHIOPIAN ECONOMY,
NATION-BUILDING
AND THE TIGRAY WAR

AN INTERVIEW WITH SEMHAL M. ZENAWI

BY MEHDI LABZAÉ

Semhal M. Zenawi uses an analysis of the Tigray war to review the shifts in Ethiopia's political economy that fuelled polarisation inside the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition. She situates the war within structural social and economic changes and shows the consequences of liberalisation on nation-building in Ethiopia. By providing insights into the factional fighting that shook the ERPFD in the 2010s, she critically unpacks how even though it was a long time before they admitted it, the political elites have unravelled their once singular economic policy model. This interview is a first step towards filling the void in political economy analyses of the current civil war in Ethiopia.

Semhal M. Zenawi is a writer who has been volunteering with a number of organisations advocating for the liberation of Tigray and achieving redress for its victims including at Tigray External Affairs Office. She is currently working on her forthcoming book Dirge for the Ethiopian Left: The Undoing of a Civil Society. As an observer of the internal politics of the former Ethiopian regime, she offers an in-depth critical analysis of the shifts in the EPRDF's economic policies in the 2010s, and exposes the structural dimensions of the conflict by situating it in the dereliction of the developmental state.

This interview was conducted by Mehdi Labzaé, a full-time researcher in political science at the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), who is currently affiliated with ISP – Paris 10 University. His research focuses on agrarian issues, state bureaucracies and contentious politics in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The interview was conducted in two parts: the first in Khartoum in November 2022, and the second in Addis Ababa in February 2024. The footnotes were added by Mehdi Labzaé.

Mehdi Labzaé: More often than not, the war in Tigray has been explained by the worsening of a political crisis that has an apparently clear ethno-national underpinning. You've gone against this trend, and are among the few people who have proposed an explanation of the war based on



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evolutions in Ethiopia's political economy. What shifts have you identified, and how have they affected polarisation?

Semhal M. Zenawi: I think there's a dearth of political economy analysis of what went wrong in Ethiopia. The thinking on what led to the genocidal war has tended to focus on the cultural instead of the material, which I don't think is independent of broader epistemological trends. I believe that work like yours on land and Amhara irredentism,¹ Sarah Vaughan's chapter on the Hailemariam years², more recently Tom Lavers' book on developmentalism and its demise³, and even Stefan Dercon's⁴ work have inched away from the cultural and historical discourse towards political economy issues. Still, explanations for the demise of the developmental state have tended to focus on its liberal democratic rather than its economic record. But the underlying grievances that ignited the Oromo protests and eventually led to this demise had more to do with the relationship between agriculture and industry and the conditions under which land and labour in particular were being released from one to the other, rather than, say, freedom of the press. The fact that one of the social pressures that have emerged from landlessness and joblessness is delayed adulthood is, I think, captured by the word *Qeerroo*, which refers to unmarried young people⁵. While there is no reason why pressures like these would not be felt in a variety of institutional

1. Semhal has reviewed several forthcoming papers on the link between past land policies and the current violence in Ethiopia's Northwestern corner, Wolqayt. It is currently one of the main bones of territorial contention between the Tigray and Amhara regions. Policies aiming at granting land to investors were part of the agricultural component of the developmental state: large-scale land investment would foster agroindustry and allow technology transfers to the peasantry. While agricultural production increased in Wolqayt and other lowlands, ethnicity provided the language through which the local elites articulated their claims to land and resources.

2. Hailemariam Dessalegn was the Prime Minister of Ethiopia from August 2012 until his resignation in February 2018. See S. Vaughan, "Things Fall Apart: The Lost Years of Hailemariam and the Rise of the Regions", in M. Plaut and S. Vaughan, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*, London, Hurst, 2023, p. 115-144. *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War* is the first book to be published about the war. It draws on the long history of Tigray's place in Ethiopia and the idea of the Ethiopian nation, while also considering the evolutions in economic policy design and factional struggles within the EPRDF. See the review of the book in this volume.

3. T. Lavers, *Ethiopia's "Developmental State": Political Order and Distributive Crisis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. Lavers situates the demise of the developmental state in the failure of industrial policies that led to a "distributive crisis". The EPRDF became unable to sustain its project of building legitimacy by sharing growth: that is, it was unable to distribute jobs, land, and other resources to the fast-growing population.

4. The DFID's chief economist from 2012 to 2017, the current Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies at the University of Oxford, and the author of *Gambling on Development: Why Some Countries Win and Others Lose*, London, Hurst, 2022, Stefan Dercon praised aspects of the developmental state (notably monetary policy and industrial parks) but also welcomed Abiy's liberal reforms, while often implying, if not actually asserting, that Tigrayans had benefited more than other nationalities from the developmental state.

5. *Qeerroo*, originally one of the age grades in a traditional Oromo governance system, is the name young Oromo protesters adopted when they demonstrated on the streets of Oromia in 2014 and the years that followed.

setups, public ownership of land and its nexus with the “nationalities” question introduces additional strains into the Ethiopian context.

What I have tried to do with my own arguments is to trace the liberalisation project in Ethiopia through its various phases, beginning in the mid-1980s, with a focus on issues of policy compatibility with the multinational nation-building project, particularly as it relates to the spatial logic of the policies introduced during Prime Minister Hailemariam’s tenure. Although he was initially adamant about policy continuity, Arkebe Oqubay, who was the chief architect of economic policy during what I would describe as Hailemariam’s “facilitatory” administration, has more recently admitted to what his admirers have described as “less ideological tinkering”⁶. Arkebe is now of the opinion that the agglomeration of rents required for the type of industrialisation he envisioned is complicated by the institutional requirements of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The conflicts in Ethiopia, including the war and genocide in Tigray, are less about multinationalism than they are a reaction to its undoing: that is, centralisation. I believe the centralising trend has less to do with the coupling of certain nation-building approaches with certain ethnicities, and more to do with the dictates of the market as understood by orthodox economists.

Many of the people who weren’t enthusiastic about the multinational state-building project feel they have been vindicated by the outbreak of violence across the country, and instrumentalise this to further the case for overturning the political structures formulated by Ethiopia’s socio-political history. I think this is misguided. Even now, it’s difficult to imagine the unitary state, or a federation composed of weak and emasculated regions defined by geography instead of ethnicity, coming to fruition (as seems to be the preference of institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund⁷) without even more apocalyptic violence.

6. Here, Semhal is referring to a quote by Stefan Dercon describing economic policies under Hailemariam Dessalegn. Arkebe Oqubay is a former TPLF Central Committee member, Mayor of Addis Abeba and Minister of Works and Urban Development who advocated for the liberalisation of the developmental state model. He summarised his beliefs on the economy in *Made in Africa: Industrial Policy in Ethiopia*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. Arkebe Oqubay is now special advisor to Ethiopia’s Prime Minister and is one of the few Tigrayan political figures who sided with Abiy Ahmed during the war in Tigray. His liberal leanings may have weighed more than the past TPLF internal factional struggles in this allegiance.

7. As the IMF and World Bank’s policy towards Ethiopia shows. The Bank’s country representative Ousmane Dione repeatedly stood next to Abiy on state visits, even at the height of the war, and more than 1.5 billion dollars of assistance from the WB was signed in 2022 alone. After Pretoria, the WB eventually presented the war as yet another episode of “fragility, conflict, and violence”, neglecting its political grounds and the role the government it was funding so abundantly played in the violence. See, among others, “FAQ on Current World Bank Engagement in Ethiopia – December 2022” [online], The World Bank, 1st December 2022: <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/ethiopia/brief/faq-on-current-world-bank-group-engagement-in-ethiopia>>, accessed on 29 March 2024. This came after decades of tumultuous relations between the IMF and the EPRDF. See Dereje Feyissa, “Aid Negotiation: The Uneasy ‘Partnership’ between the EPRDF and the Donors”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 5, n° 4, 2011, p. 788-817.

If the multinational nation-building trajectory alone is to blame for the rise of right-wing populism in Ethiopia (although it is rarely described as such), then what's responsible for its rise in established democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom? Why are we as a global community facing the very real prospect of right-wing nationalists taking over in the citadels of neoliberalism and a very real breakdown of even the facade of global law and order? Why are countries with such disparate political histories and institutional arrangements as India, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the United States challenged by this political tide? I don't think multinational federalism cuts it as an explanation, although it has certainly informed the way right-wing populism operates in Ethiopia, has coloured its rhetoric, and so on. I don't want to erase the particularities of these countries' experiences, but I also don't believe it's possible to understand the current Prosperity regime⁸ in Ethiopia outside the global context and the evident emergence of the far right as a mainstream political force. The question of what conditions – structural or otherwise – give rise to populism is also linked to this.

M. L.: Can you give me more details on the policy changes under Hailemariam you're referring to? Do they amount to the end of the Ethiopian developmental state, which is a strongly anti-neoliberal model of state intervention in the economy with the aim of attaining "shared" growth through industrialisation – or maybe you'd like to define it differently?

S. M. Z.: Part of the issue with defining the developmental state is that the nature of its interventions is decided empirically, and they are built on the particularities of the social and political history of the specific society. There's no universally applicable set of prescriptions for intervention, or non-intervention, as there is with the neoliberalism of the Washington Consensus. We're often reminded that the East Asian exemplars of the developmental state didn't think of themselves as developmental. What was pivotal was the mission, ethos and orientation of the state. In Meles's definition of the democratic developmental state, he identifies three characteristics that are shared between states that have effectively brought about a societal transformation: firstly, there must be

8. The Prosperity Party was created in December 2019 after a renaming of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and as the result of a major ideological redefinition of the coalition that had ruled Ethiopia for 28 years. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed embraced neoliberalism and criticised the institutional system based on the recognition of ethnicity as the basis for political representation. The PP inherited the EPRDF's structure but dissolved its ethno-nationalist character, merging national parties into one officially single organisation – within which ethnicity paradoxically still provides the organizational basis.

an unwavering commitment to accelerated growth and development is often motivated by the view that failure to bring about this kind of development poses a threat to society; secondly, the population at large must acquire the norms, values and skills that would motivate it to add value to and benefit from the economy accordingly; and thirdly, there is the relative autonomy of the state – that is, its political and economic independence from the private sector and other urban constituencies, including labour.

M. L.: When, then, was the Ethiopian democratic developmental state laid in its coffin?

S. M. Z.: As you mentioned, I've made the case elsewhere⁹ that the changes introduced by the “shift from agriculture to industry” policy that was introduced in 2013, halfway through the Growth and Transformation Plan 1 (GTP1) period (2010-2015), assume the existence of a homogeneous consolidated national identity. It's therefore obviously incompatible with the multinational state-building project that was sparked by the student movement of the 1970s and given institutional legitimacy by the advent of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The Addis Abeba Master Plan, which initially ignited protests in the Oromia region, has been lauded for its technocratic proficiency, but this proficiency is at odds with the institutions devised by Ethiopian socio-political history.

During this period, Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn complained publicly about the technocratic feasibility of the “megaprojects” planned for GTP1, essentially because of their distance from viable markets. The rationale underpinning their spatial logic was informed less by the requirements of the market and more by the needs of multinational state-building, which would, of course, involve the devaluation of the markets that were historically concentrated around the capital. These megaprojects – the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), the national railway system, etc. – were conceived not just from the perspective of market feasibility but primarily from a nation-building standpoint. One could even argue that they were carried out in spite of their market feasibility, which is why you would require state intervention in the first instance, to make unfeasible markets feasible. I think the construction of the national rail project, the Addis Abeba Light Railway and the Addis Abeba-Djibouti train really exemplifies the change in thinking. Hailemariam came under heavy fire in Tigray at one point for saying “You won't get a railway because it doesn't

9. Notably in “Dirge for the Ethiopian Left”, a paper presented at the Agrarian South conference in February 2024, “Dirge for the Ethiopian Left” [online], <http://www.agrariansouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/SEMHAL-ZENAWI_Dirge-for-the-Ethiopian-Left.pdf>, accessed on 29 March 2024.

make market sense". This was around 2017, if I'm not mistaken¹⁰. To my mind, the national railway, or perhaps the lack of it, really exemplifies the changes in economic perspective during the Hailemariam years.

This is true in terms not just of spatial logic and nation-building but also of technology transfer and the primacy of the domestic company: that is, the obviously domestic military-industrial complex primarily servicing the domestic market versus the foreign direct investment-driven export platform. The former was embodied by the Metals and Engineering Corporation (METEC), the military-industrial complex in charge of the GERD, and the latter was represented by the industrial parks during the Hawassa period (the Bole Lemi industrial park is different from the others for a number of reasons, I think): that is, projects as a pillar of technology transfer and employment, or in the case of the latter wealth creation. In terms of the accumulation of technological capacity, the shift also saw a move from an attempt to create a German type of national innovation system that is sometimes termed the "diffusion model" built on a broad dissemination of technological capacity to a more Anglo-Saxon "mission model" in line with the "islands of success" preferred by the international financial institutions¹¹.

Bereket Simon¹² has elaborated on issues to do with economic policy, patterns of urbanisation and the concomitant issues of nation-building. He mentions, for instance, that the real influence of the 2005 elections on the policy was a focus on youth unemployment and small-town development (many of the "distributive pressures" we mentioned earlier boiled over into what has sometimes been referred to as "rurban" areas, where social pressures to graduate to "adulthood" by making a family that have been hindered by a lack of access to income and property, especially in the case of young men, may be felt more acutely)¹³. This obviously conflicts with the post-2012 focus on regional capitals as hubs of industry, and relates to the spatial logic of markets on the one hand and the requirements of multinational state-building on the other.

Despite his position on economic liberalisation, Bereket Simon was the primary driver behind the economic counterpart to the "Transition From Agriculture to

10. Semhal is referring to a speech by Hailemariam Dessalegn on a visit to Tigray in which he stated that the priority in the development of Ethiopia's railways was to connect Addis Abeba to ports, thus justifying the cancellation of a planned railway line to Tigray at a time when peace with Eritrea did not seem to be on anybody's agenda. See Fetsum Berhane, "Speech on the Railway Network Given by PM Hailemariam Dessalegn in Adwa" [in Amharic: ጠ/ሚ. ኃይለማሪያም ደሳለኝ ስለባቡር ኒትወርክ በዳድዋ ያደረጉት ንግግር] [online], *Horn Affairs*, 26 April 2017, <<http://hornaffairs.com/am/2017/04/26/pm-hailemariam-desalegn-speech-adwa-about-railway/>>, accessed on 29 March 2024.

11. On the territorialisation of capital in neoliberal times and the orders (and disorders) it created, see J. Ferguson, "Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Africa", *American Anthropologist*, vol. 107, n° 3, 2005, p. 377-382.

12. A former Amhara National Democratic Movement Central Committee member, one of the leading figures in the EPRDF and a government spokesperson from 1995 to 2012. He is the author of *A Tale of Two Elections* [in Amharic: የሁለት ስብሰባዎች ወግ], Addis Abeba, 2011.

13. A trend described in Alula Pankhurst (ed.), *Change and Transformation in 20 Rural Communities in Ethiopia: Selected Aspects and Implications for Policy*, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia Wide, 2017.

Industry”, which was termed “*Tilk Tihadesso*” (deep renewal) in reference to the “*Tihadesso*” (renewal) that brought about the developmental state. Indeed, the “*Tilk Tihadesso*” was initially launched as a 15-year review of the developmental state with the aim of correcting its perceived failures. Whereas the economic analysis was that the “structural transformation” of the economy hadn’t been achieved politically, the failure of the developmental state was identified as a lack of political plurality. Bereket Simon pushed to manufacture plurality by introducing proportional representation and making concessions to opposition groups that had little societal legitimacy and were the kind of “parasitic elite” the developmental premise believed to be a significant part of the problem. In some sense, the need for a mission-oriented vanguard party is contingent on the need to transform the nature of the elites from extractive to productive. The actual development of democratic institutions, including with the kind of plurality Bereket Simon hoped to introduce, is not unconnected to the structural transformation of the economy. Both sets of reforms, including the fact that there was such a stark separation between the political and the economic, signified an abandonment of the premise that the real issue was underdeveloped state and market institutions. Tigray became the only region to actually implement Bereket Simon’s plans for constitutional amendments in the direction of proportional representation in anticipation of the election that was the catalyst for the genocidal war. However good the intentions behind the amendment might have been, the lack of a public discourse around the constitutional changes and the manner in which they were pushed through was, in my opinion, also consistent with neoliberal authoritarianism.

So I would contend that the developmental state was laid in its coffin, to use your expression, with the respective launches of *Tilk Tihadesso* and GTP 2 (2015–2020) (the complete articulation of the “transition from agriculture to industry”). GTP 2 was not only lauded by IMF chief Christine Lagarde as a “step in the right direction” after more than a decade of tumultuous relations between the Ethiopian government and the Fund, but was also the primary driver behind Obama’s July 2015 visit to Ethiopia. At the time, Obama was promoting his “Power Africa” initiative, and was especially interested in liberalising the power generation projects and pushing General Electric’s involvement in the GERD. METEC CEO Kinfe Dagnew’s refusal to allow this put him at loggerheads with Hailemariam Dessalegn, and it was shortly after this disagreement that METEC was investigated by Parliament – it was the only state-owned enterprise ever to go through such an investigation.

The abysmal failure of the turn from developmentalism to industrial policy in the early 2010s isn’t fully accounted for by its inability to stimulate the volumes of employment necessary to cope with Ethiopia’s “youth dividend”, or by the fact that despite the economy’s claims to being export-oriented, exports were lower in 2016 than they had been in 2012 or that we saw significant reversals in social indicators during this period. Above all, it was because less than a decade after

the turn to an industrial policy, Ethiopia is once again the same poster child for war and famine it was in the 1980s – a huge reversal of the gains made in nation-building.

M. L.: How do these trends relate to internal EPRDF politics? How did the party's gradual dismantlement of the developmental state lead to the coalition's self-destruction by the radicalisation of obscure factional fighting and polarisation? What was the basis of the factional struggle, and what factions were involved?

S. M. Z.: I think it's important to highlight the fact that despite the long-standing image of the EPRDF as a monolith (which therefore undercuts the proper function of federalism), it was structurally designed to be beholden to its respective constituencies in ways that, for instance, the Prosperity Party (PP) that replaced it is not. The amount of legitimacy you enjoyed in your constituency influenced the kind of power you could project within the EPRDF at a federal level. The ways in which the respective constituencies shaped the behaviour of the parties in their search for legitimacy and so on are often glossed over. For instance, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) hasn't faced the kind of competitive pressures in Tigray that the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) did in Oromia, perhaps since its military defeat of organisations like the EDU¹⁴. The view of EPRDF as a monolith also obscures important distinctions in the political cultures of its various components and their development over time. The growing importance of evangelical networks, particularly within OPDO and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM), comes to mind here.

Not too much attention has been paid to this point because the parties' decision-making organs as sites of political contestation, the fairness of the rules and procedures governing these contestations – or the lack thereof – and the changes to and breaches of these procedures and rules haven't been taken very seriously. In part, this stems from an overestimation of the capacity of democratic centralism to purge politics of political differences. This is perhaps bolstered by the fact that for a time it was very good at fostering cohesive organisational action, but I think this goes back to the kind of buy-in the organisational decision-making bodies had as arbiters of political contestation. Aside from "democratic centralism", I think a degree of analytical laziness is evident in the scholarship on EPRDF, particularly when the period after the Ethiopia-Eritrea war is being discussed. There is a reliance on a prevalent stereotype in African studies of the African strongman. For instance, although both Vaughan and Lavers articulate

14. The Ethiopian Democratic Union was a group that fought for the restoration of the feudal order from the 1974 Revolution to the late 1970s, before being militarily defeated by the TPLF.

a desire to avoid the “big man theory”, they both rely on “the death of Meles” to explain the more assertive regions and the breakdown of organisational cohesion inside the EPRDF during the Hailemariam years (2012-2018). I’m not convinced by this. For one thing, at the height of Meles’s supposedly unchallenged influence in EPRDF in 2010, he was unable to retire himself, let alone the rest of the old guard who were slated for retirement. I think his failure to retire, even at the risk of breaking his ties with the party, was his most consequential political error, but it also speaks to the limits of his power and the Executive Committee’s ability to discipline its chairman. I can only remember one instance apart from the public announcement of his plans to retire in 2010 in which he spoke without the consent of his party: the article on Ana Gomes and the 2005 elections¹⁵. It’s easy to forget now how politically embarrassing it was for him to eat his words. All this is to say that it’s unclear what led to a weakening of the party’s decision-making bodies’ ability to host political contestation and foster collective action, but building clarity around this issue means examining these processes in depth rather than explaining them away by an individual death.

What is clear is that the policy-making function of the EPRDF was weakened. The less ideological tinkering we mentioned earlier was gradually being pushed ahead, largely through the concentration of institutional power in the Prime Minister’s office, where many of the old guard who had been pushed out of party structures by the “*metekakat*” policy¹⁶ had coalesced as advisors, special envoys and so on. In my opinion, the passage of the law that formally brought the Attorney-General under the Prime Minister’s office marked the beginning of neoliberal authoritarianism in Ethiopia¹⁷. Here too, I think, the view of a

15. Semhal is referring to a letter written by Meles Zenawi dated 31 August 2005 and published in the *Ethiopian Herald*. The Prime Minister gave a critical response to the report by the EU Electoral Observation Mission on the 2005 general elections, led by the Portuguese European MP Ana Gomes. Citing the report extensively, Meles refuted the EU’s position as Western interference in Ethiopian citizens’ sovereign choice, all the more so because Gomes subsequently endorsed calls for new elections. Gomes later took other critical stances towards the EPRDF. Despite being a Social Democrat, she visited Ethiopia in 2019, praised Abiy’s “reforms” and was welcomed by the then right-wing and centre-right former opposition leaders from 2005. Among them was Eskander Negga, who had called for the genocide of Tigrayans in 2005. In an interview in the *Ethiopian Herald* published on 17 August 2021, Gomes advocated for the withdrawal of aid to war-torn Ethiopia, endorsing the siege and blaming the TPLF for the war. On social media, meanwhile, she aligned with accounts producing hate speech against Tigrayans. Meles’ 2005 letter is available online: “Letter by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to the Editor of the Ethiopian Herald” [online], Walta Information Center, <<https://waltainfo.com/50268/>>, accessed on 29 March 2024.

16. *Metekakat* (general replacement or succession) was the plan adopted by the EPRDF in 2010 to organise generational replacement within the party leadership until 2015.

17. The law establishing the Attorney-General in place of the Ministry of Justice was passed in 2016 under Hailemariam Dessalegn. While the announced objective was strengthening the regime’s capacity to fight corruption, it actually made the Attorney-General accountable to the Prime Minister, moving one step further away from guaranteeing the independence of the judiciary. Once he was in office, Abiy Ahmed named close allies to the position, notably the incumbent Gedion Timotheos, who is considered to be one of the intellectual figures of the regime, and who is leading the design of Ethiopia’s Transitional Justice policy.

merged “party/state” has meant that little attention has been paid to the interplay between the state and the party and the ways the relationship has developed over time. Even less attention has been given to EPRDF’s own analysis of the relationship between retirement and rent-seeking.

Along with the weakening of the party’s policy-making function and the frequent contravention of its decisions came the decline in its ability to conclusively arbitrate political differences and mobilise cohesive action. This was compounded by the way the changes, which were largely crafted and driven by the TPLF’s old guard – although perhaps they are publicly most associated with Arkebe Oqubay – were carried out, and how these policies interacted with the governing structures and economic pressures as they existed on the ground. After the economy began to crash in 2016, we saw ambitious younger members of the EPRDF, OPDO in particular, starting to stoke anti-Tigrayan sentiment – that is, to deploy right-wing populism in lieu of the kind of economic populism and broad-based inclusive growth that had become associated with the EPRDF – partly because it had stopped delivering this kind of development. With the “*lewt*”¹⁸ of 2018, we witnessed a move away from islands of success, which had never really got off the ground in any case, towards secure, securitized pockets of (largely illicit) extraction mediated by Middle Eastern capital, a model of degrowth we’ve seen in Sudan and Somalia in the Horn but that is also visible across the Sahel¹⁹.

I’m sure one could identify more reasons for the regions becoming more assertive towards the federal government that are probably more convincing than the death of an individual, but I think one of the significant contributing factors was the bulldozing of policy changes past the party organs in ways that reduced their capacity to act as conflict resolution and consensus-building mechanisms. I have tried to focus my analysis on the relationship between economic policy and nation-building, in particular the obvious incompatibility between policies that were adopted under Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and the multinational federal structure of Ethiopia. I think the party’s ability to cope with these pressures was simultaneously reduced by the initial refusal to admit that the changes were in fact changes. In contrast, previous recalibrations of political programmes such as the one in the late 1980s and early 2000s were openly discussed and approved by the party congresses, for example, in ways that allowed for institutional clarity and organisational cohesiveness.

18. *Lewt* (change) or *yelewt gize* (the time of change) is the name proposed by Abiy Ahmed to refer to his takeover, presenting it as a time of reform and appeasement. Many Ethiopians have adopted the term, sometimes with a heavy dose of irony.

19. On the link between Gulf markets and the violent liberation of lands for export-oriented productions that lead to forms of growth that are more destructive than commonly beneficial, see M. Duffield and N. Stockton, “How Capitalism is Destroying the Horn of Africa: Sheep and the Crisis in Somalia and Sudan”, *Review of African Political Economy*, 2023.

I think the factionalism, the party's gradual descent into adopting a "backroom horse-trading" approach to politics, is both a function of the ideology that was adopted and the manner in which it was adopted. The endless cynical – and hugely costly in terms of human life – realignment among political actors is consistent with a conceptualisation of politics as little more than rent-sharing agreements among gambling elites.

M. L.: Coming to the aftermath of the war, the Pretoria Agreement can be seen as the TPLF negotiating its own survival at the cost of abandoning the legitimacy and mandate it had secured in the September 2020 elections. However, the party seems to be more divided after the agreement than it was during the war, and even before. Do you share this view?

S. M. Z.: The precedents that constrained the Pretoria negotiations were to some extent set by the terms of the Seychelles agreement, which was signed in secret when Tigray's bargaining position was stronger than it was during the Pretoria negotiations. For instance, bringing unfettered humanitarian access to the negotiating table, which the TPLF had publicly refused to do, was established by the Seychelles agreement, the terms of which are still hidden from public scrutiny. Assefa Abreha was Tigray's principal negotiator at the time. He answered directly to the then-President Debretsion Gebremichael, who had appointed him to be his special envoy to the Horn. I'm not as convinced as others are that the primary function of Pretoria was to save the TPLF, partly because of the composition of the negotiating team, which was at least one-third non-TPLF, and in fact included individuals who harbour publicly articulated resentment towards the TPLF. Moreover, the fact that the greatest opposition to Pretoria has come from the TPLF, on whose behalf the document was signed, would also suggest that Pretoria's primary function wasn't saving it.

The humiliating terms of the Pretoria Agreement are primarily a reflection of the dire military, political, diplomatic and humanitarian crisis Tigray was facing at the time it was signed. The federal government was convinced it could take Mekelle and impose even more terms as the victor. Some members of Tigray's Central Command also felt that the fall of Mekelle was inevitable. Shortly after the fall of Shire, Tsadkan Gebretensae²⁰ sent a distress call in the form of a mass text to friends in the international community²¹. It is a remarkable historical

20. Tsadkan Gebretensae is one of the TPLF commanders who led the battalions that took Addis Abeba in 1991. He was Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian Army in the 1990s, notably during the war against Eritrea (1998-2000) and until 2001, when he opposed Meles Zenawi in the TPLF debates and the subsequent splinter. He was involved in the agro-industrial business in the 2010s before becoming one of the leaders of the TDF during the war in Tigray.

21. Tsadkan's message, which was sent on 15 October 2022, reads: "Dear Colleagues! Our main defence around Shire has collapsed, mainly because of ammunition and other supplies. Now it is a matter of

document. However, the adoption of what Tadesse Werede²² termed “flexible” defence seems to have created more negotiating space for Tigray by successfully maintaining a defensive line around Shire and avoiding the Ethiopian army’s entry into Mekelle in October 2022. I look forward to greater public and scholarly scrutiny of military strategy and why certain things were and weren’t adopted, and how that led us to Pretoria, in the near future.

Pretoria and Nairobi are surrender agreements, documents of a remarkable legal simplicity that along with giving war crimes supposed legality have the overturning of Tigray’s democratic will as their primary goal. Although the factions that became glaringly obvious in the post-Pretoria period were in play long before it was signed, the disbanding and diminishment of Tigrayan resistance to genocidal tyranny from the centre was made inevitable by the fact that Pretoria signed away its political premise and organising principle, which was elected government.

In terms of the visible factionalism within its leadership, while I think existing frictions may have been stoked by the lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the negotiating team, and while differing interpretations of the terms exist, the factions were fuelled, and not created, by Pretoria and Nairobi. I think the factionalism obscures the degree to which there is an elite consensus in Tigray. While I don’t believe that any credible accusations of genocide can be made against Tigray’s leadership and therefore we can’t suggest that there’s any equivalence with the federal government, the underlying conceptualisation of politics as rent-sharing agreements among gambling elites remains the same. There is cross-cutting agreement on this among all political and would-be civic actors such as scholars, as represented by the Global Society of Tigray Scholars and religious institutions and their leadership. Despite the sloganeering by certain elements within the TPLF leadership, there is consensus on the need to abandon its social basis there, too.

The adoption in Tigray’s public debate of terms that are associated with the Abiy regime, for instance the renaming of “opposition” (*tekawami*) parties to “competitive parties” (*tenahanati*) or the more recent coalescence around the term “*brakhe*”, translated into Tigrigna from Prosperity’s “*kefeta*” (elevation in Amharic), is emblematic of the underlying similarities between the reform programmes implemented in Tigray and the rest of Ethiopia. In that sense, politics in Ethiopia, including Tigray, has become a textbook example of a rent-seeking political economy, the victim of parasitic elites: the archetypal African

the time when both enemies will overrun the whole of Tigray. TDF soldiers fought gallantly for 50 plus days, day and night non-stop inflicting heavy damage on the enemies and scoring many tactical victories. But it could not stop the enemies. The world will be watching another genocide happening in Tigray.”

22. Tadesse Werede is a former TPLF commander, later a Lieutenant-General in the Ethiopian Army, and a UN peacekeeper. He led the TDF during the war in Tigray.

comprador. The way I understand the factionalism, as I said earlier, is that it is gambles and disputes over rents by increasingly parasitic elites.

M. L.: While the TDF now plays a role in Tigray politics, the Ethiopian army seems to have an even greater influence on local and federal politics. It has adopted a more assertive political role since successive states of emergency and local “command posts” have allowed it to rule wide areas of the country. The generals seem to count among the very few people Abiy accepts criticism from. Do you think the new role of the army changes the nature of the Ethiopian state?

S. M. Z.: I tend to view the states of emergency, increased militarisation and proliferation of militia and other armed activity through the lens of the political economy issues we mentioned earlier. Neoliberal reforms in Ethiopia and elsewhere have always been accompanied by the deployment of state violence, from those implemented by Augusto Pinochet to those currently being implemented by Emmanuel Macron, although admittedly the violence deployed is of a different category. This is probably more useful for interpreting the states of emergency under Hailemariam. As I was saying earlier, the model of development moved from “islands of success” to secure, securitized “pockets of extraction” under Abiy’s Prosperity regime with all the same features we’ve seen across the Sahel and closer to home in Sudan and Somalia.

At the risk of being old-fashioned, one could also view the situation through the Marxist frameworks that were previously applied to the militarisation of the state and the institutionalisation of predatory extractive practices: that is, through the lens of Bonapartism, as famously applied to the military junta by the student movement thinker Addis Hiwet in the 1980s and then again during the “*Tihadesso*” period of the late 1990s-early 2000s. Despite the significant economic and social gains that were made, particularly in the aftermath of *Tihadesso*, the social structure produced by the 1974 revolution remains. It is conducive to the emergence of “a society in which an abortive revolution gives rise to military-bureaucratic apparatus whose leaders, no longer accountable to any societal constituency, care only about themselves”²³. If we were to stick to the liberal – perhaps even technocratic – formulations that underpinned the developmental state, we might argue that there was an abandonment of the attempt to transform the economy from one that incentivises predatory extractive practices on the part of the elite to one that encourages productive value-adding economic activity in markets that can support complex transactions.

23. T. Weis, *Vanguard Capitalism: Party, State, and Market in EPRDF Ethiopia*, Doctoral Thesis, Oxford, University of Oxford, 2016, p. 225.

The role the military now plays in the political economy is linked to the entrenchment of a purely extractive economy. For instance, it's likely that we'll see the Tigrayan state and TDF use violence to enforce new economic relationships with the Canadian and other mining interests that are set to displace the artisanal miners who have so far operated within a protected domestic market.

M. L.: Eritrean involvement in the preparation of the war and its execution is clear. Observers insist that there are Eritrean and regional dimensions of the war, portraying it as a plan that was formulated as much in Asmara as it was in Addis Abeba²⁴. How did the war affect regional politics, and did it change regional alliances?

S. M. Z.: There was a general portrayal in which Issayas was the mastermind and Abiy the lapdog, but the post-Pretoria manoeuvring showed that they are at least evenly matched in their nefarious political operations. However, I think the focus on the regional elements obscures the more international causes of the war.

M. L.: What international causes? And what international responsibilities for what happened?

S. M. Z.: Verhoeven and Woldemariam have done an excellent job of chronicling the extent to which the West was involved not only in Abiy's rise to power but also in underwriting the concentration of power around his person, in breach of the Ethiopian Constitution and even international humanitarian law²⁵. They also identify a desire to open up markets as the primary driver of these policies.

Very early on, a leaked UN memo written by Ahunna Eziakonwa and signed by Achim Steiner²⁶ read like PR for the federal government. It not only regurgitated its talking points but also went as far as to justify grave crimes against humanity, including the ethnic cleansing in Wolqayt (where I can trace my maternal lineage for some twelve generations) as mildly regrettable but inevitable outcomes of war. The memo justified the withdrawal of the budget for the Tigray region ahead of the war as a legitimate action aimed at "weakening the TPLF", and in so doing underwrote the state's abdication of its obligations

24. See M. Plaut, "Eritrea, the Horn and the Path to War", in M. Plaut and S. Vaughan, *Understanding Ethiopia's Tigray War*, op. cit., p. 188-213.

25. H. Verhoeven and M. Woldemariam, "Who Lost Ethiopia? The Unmaking of an African Anchor State and U.S. Foreign Policy", *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 23, n° 4, 2022, p. 622-650.

26. See C. Lynch and R. Gramer, "UNDP Memo Echoes Ethiopian Talking Points on Tigray" [online], *Foreign Policy*, 9 March 2021, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/09/ethiopia-tigray-conflict-united-nations-undp-memo-atrocities-ethnic-cleansing-allegations/>>, accessed on 29 March 2024.

towards its Tigrayan citizens (including the right to security) over political differences among the members of the EPRDF. Clearly, the conflation of the TPLF with the entire Tigrayan population was not only an Abiy thing: it was globally accepted, and normalised.

The memo then goes on to present the indefinite suspension of the inalienable right to elect political representation as a prerequisite for the protection of Tigrayan human rights, stating that “Tigrayans are torn between loyalty to the outcome of their election and bitter humanitarian disaster”, and justifies the postponement of elections in the rest of the country until all Abiy’s opponents had been neutralised, violently or otherwise. Given the amount of international credibility lent to the elections, leaving aside other irregularities, it’s difficult to recall that large swathes of the country outside Tigray have yet to vote.

The memo is a concise representation of the international communities’ encouragement of genocide in exchange for market penetration. The UNDP had been supporting Ethiopia’s Homegrown Economic Reform Agenda (EHERA) primarily through SEEDS, its programme for “Supporting Elections for Ethiopian Democratic Strengthening”. This 40 million dollar three-year programme ended up by justifying the violent nullification of what it was supposed to support: elections. The war punished Tigrayans, and with Pretoria the West reaffirmed the position of the UDNP memo: elections can be overturned by the commission of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. The decision by various aid agencies to extend the siege by denying humanitarian aid – initially just to Tigray – is further proof of the lengths they’re willing to go to to blackmail the people of Tigray into giving up their aspirations to overcome the vagaries of poverty. This is bolstered by the fact that the suspension of aid, ostensibly because of thefts we later found out were largely carried out by the ENDF, the Prime Minister’s office and the WFP (which behaved appallingly throughout the war), was only lifted after agreements to undo what was left of rural social assets were met²⁷. There has been a suspension of aid to the poor and war-ravaged, not to the Prime Minister’s office. The targeting of the basic unit for the delivery of public services, the *woreda* despite evidence of thefts organised through the highest office in the country, says more about how the global aid industry creates markets for itself than it does about state efficiency, or the lack thereof, in the delivery of public goods.

It’s important to remember that the war largely took place in rural Tigray, and that 85% of the health facilities, schools and so on that were destroyed were rural social assets. Some of Tigray’s leadership now openly talk about the rural economy being too “cumbersome” a weight for them to carry. Whether they’re being blackmailed into this position or have arrived at it of their own volition, it’s a remarkable betrayal of a social group that shielded and protected the leaders

27. USAID and WFP suspended their aid (including food aid) to Tigray March and December 2023, on the basis of alleged “widespread and systemic diversion”.

and returned them to their seats at the costs of their own and their children's lives. Given that the Tigrayan economy now supports tens of starvation-related deaths a week, it's unclear whether the abandonment of the farmers will allow sustainable politics of any kind to emerge in Tigray ■

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Résumé

L'économie éthiopienne, la construction nationale et la guerre au Tigray.

Entretien avec Semahl M. Zenawi réalisé par Mehdi Labzaé

À travers une analyse de la guerre au Tigray, Semhal M. Zenawi revient sur les principaux tournants de la politique économique éthiopienne qui ont alimenté les clivages au sein de la coalition de l'EPRDF. Elle replace le conflit dans le cadre des transformations économiques et sociales structurelles du pays et observe les conséquences de la libéralisation sur la construction nationale. En revenant sur les luttes factionnelles qui ont secoué l'EPRDF dans les années 2010, elle analyse de manière critique la façon dont les élites politiques, même si elles ont mis du temps à l'admettre, ont démantelé le modèle de politique économique singulier de l'État développemental. Cet entretien marque le début d'une prise en compte, encore timide, de l'économie politique de l'actuelle guerre civile.